Arnold Bennett Still Himself

MR. PROHACK. By Arnold Bennett. George H. Doran Company.

HALF the fun in reading Arnold Bennett's new novel is in discovering that Bennett is still himself. He is still the boy from the Five Towns, half starved, æsthetically and gorgeously gorging on the feast of London; still the author who could afford to tell "The Truth About an Author"; still the vivacious fellow creature who simply cannot refrain from instructing us in the proper investment of the twenty-four hours of the day. And, quite incidentally, a capital story teller. . . .

Yes, a novelist. . . . In two or three books—"The Old Wives' Tale"; "Clayhanger"—actually what the French call *un grand écrivain*, a great writer. . . . In much more numerous books, a story teller of characteristic style, cunning observation, facetious philosophy and a really excellent brand of humor. An engaging, impudent and altogether amusing fellow. A chap who audaciously and without warning switches from merely entertaining to fairly preaching at us; and then, just as we are beginning to feel resentful, drops back with the same irrelevance into the simple role of entertainer. We can't entirely make him out, this Bennett; we feel surprised, annoyed, vaguely irritated. Confound the man, where did he get his facetiousness, his touch of impudence, his gift for irrelevance? It must be because he lived for some time in France—what on earth would a native of Staffordshire want at Fontainebleau and in Paris, anyway? Of course, it's his own business if he won't take himself seriously; but, as his readers, we really have a right to demand that he take *us* seriously. Yes, indeed!

Such a misunderstood individual, this Bennett! A beastly shame. Highly ironical, too, when you stop to consider that, to an extent not practiced by any other author he's told us all about himself and what he's continually up to. Writing to make money, for instance; nobody could be more candid about the production of certain books that frankly were potboilers. And then we persist, whole heaps of us, in going right ahead and misunderstanding him. . . .

Perhaps it wouldn't matter so much if Bennett had been less candid and were less personally sensitive. Fact! He is. Bennett is one of the most vulnerable fellows alive; certainly the most vulnerable, in his personal feelings, of any writer of his standing. Why, when a lot of critics and people threw bricks at his last-before-this novel, "The Pretty Lady," old Arnold was so chagrined he almost shed tears of vexation. Said he'd been misunderstood by a lot of Puritans and things like that; he hadn't meant anything by taking a French courtesan stranded in London as his heroine, she just appealed to him as interesting and human and pathetic and transiently worth while. He couldn't think what the American reviewers, or some of them, were thinking of. . . . He's a sensitive old dear, if he *is* 55.

But that was way back over three years ago. Since then Bennett has given us time to compose our minds by abstaining from fiction and merely passing out a book on women, creatures he knows a lot about, and on "Things That Have Interested Me" and that he thinks we don't know enough about. That title, though! There we were again. Some of us thought it had a pretty conceited sound; as if Bennett visioned a world palpitant to hear what had interested him. The truth about the author was utterly different; the title, "Things That Have Interested Me," was a deliberate effort at modesty.

Never mind! "Mr. Prohack" has been published; it'll set right the late misunderstanding. Perfectly proper people monopolize its 300 closely printed pages and there's no pretense that you need take them seriously. As to the story:

Arthur Charles Prohack is a Treasury official with a wife and a grown son and daughter and a comfortable home in London. During the war he saved his country half a billion, but outside his two clubs and the Government departments no one ever heard of Prohack. We make his acquaintance on the day of the sad discovery that he has committed the greatest of crimes, genteel poverty. This revelation has barely taken place, Mr. Prohack has hardly adjusted himself to the fact and Mrs. Prohack has adjusted herself not at all, when, from an undreamt of source, a fortune devolves upon the Treasury's faithful servant. The catastrophe is completed in Mr. Bennett's first couple of chapters, and the remaining twenty-one chapters of the novel have to do with wealth and its consequences. One of these, almost immediately, is more wealth; another is the severance of Mr. Prohack's connection with his job and his induction into the strenuous life of idleness; a third is the transformation of Mr. Prohack's son, Charles, from a cynical ex-service man into a competent young millionaire. But these are the unimportant consequences—large, obvious results. The really interesting details are such trifles as Mr. Prohack's illness, so carefully presided over by his wife and a Portuguese quack; the erran-

Arnold Bennett.

cies of his daughter, Sissie; his engagement of a social secretary with an aspiring nose; his manipulations in the matter of Mrs. Prohack's pearl necklace. . . . The precise amount of Mr. Prohack's weekly income is nothing compared to the problems of his duodenum, his Lady Massulam, his first Turkish bath, his first first night, his plots against Eve (as he calls Mrs. Prohack) and his presciences regarding Eve's and Sissie's plots against himself. Life, Mr. Bennett seems to say through the thoughts and speeches of Arthur Charles Prohack, is nothing if it isn't an affair of willfully shifting the emphasis, of selecting one's own nuances and creating one's own shading. To every one else the fact of money may seem of transcendant importance; but when you have money in practically unlimited amount it is of no importance whatever. Mr. Bennett, with the true imaginativeness, has put himself in Mr. Prohack's place. His novel could be accurately subtitled: "Wonder What an Immoderately Wealthy Man Thinks About?" The answer to that question is, for Bennet, particularly easy; it consists in things that Mr. Bennett himself has always been preoccupied with, enormously curious over—things like modern dancing and the minds of fair young women, and the minds of imposing elderly women, and the minds of devoted wives like Eve and the gilded interiors of palatial houses and the savor of superfluous luxuries and London clubs and the attitudes of servants and the answer to Life itself when you're assured that there isn't, anyway, any satisfactory answer.

In light social comedy, such as "Mr. Prohack," Mr. Bennett seldom gives place to anybody; Somerset Maugham and Compton Mackenzie are not more adroit. Consider such phrases as make up Mr. Prohack's survey of obese Sir Paul Spinner, the city magnate, "embossed with carbuncles . . . a man who was practically all prejudices and waste products"; or this description of a place in Bond street: "The shop was all waxed parquetry, silks, satins, pure linen and pure wool, diversified by a few walking sticks and a cuff link or so." These, of course, are merely discriptive *mots;* but in the management of diverting conversation Mr. Bennett is not inferior. Very occasionally we get a long speech, as we might in a comedy written to be acted on the stage and not simply to be read between cloth covers. Such are Dr. Veiga's monologue on Mr. Prohack's bodily condition, which sounds like the Bennett who gave us a booklet on "The Human Machine"; and Mr. Prohack's own commentary on the unlimited liability of parents toward their children. Eve, alarmed by her son's splurge in the world, thinks his father ought to remonstrate with Charlie. Whereupon Mr. Prohack points out:

"You ought to have thought of all this over twenty years ago, before Charlie was born, before we were married, before you met me. To become a parent is to accept terrible risks. . . . He owes nothing whatever to me, or to you. If we were starving and he had plenty he would probably consider it his duty to look after us; but that's the limit of what he owes us. Whereas nothing can put an end to our responsibility toward him. You see, we brought him here. We thought it would be so nice to have children, and so Charlie arrived. He didn't choose his time, and he didn't choose his character, nor his education, nor his chance. If he had his choice you may depend he'd have chosen differently. Do you want me, on the top of all that, to tell him that he must obediently accept something else from us—our code of conduct? it would be mere cheek. . . ."

No doubt we shall have an addition to the Bennett pocket philosophies; something like "How to Wean Parents." It is needed in a world full of flappers and almost devoid of philosophical Prohacks.

In fact, though "Mr. Prohack" deserves fullest praise as a book of entertainment, the novel is open to one slaying criticism—there are no Prohacks. It may be objected that this makes no difference so long as there are Bennetts, and the answer to that is, alas, there is only one of him. When Arnold, old dear, dies there will then not even be a single specimen of the human race to point to as proof that such a creature as Mr. Prohack could exist. The book which we laugh over and accept with so much pleasure will then go into the class of fabulous stories, like "Gulliver's Travels" and "News from Nowhere." And Arnold Bennett, the sedulous realist, the artful moralizer, the ingenious provider of discreet fun, will be lumped with the early H. G. Wells and the later Henry James as the wildest of romancers. That is what it is to be misunderstood in this fumbling old world and to try to disarm all misunderstanding at the absurd age of fifty-five.

GRANT OVERTON.

The Negro's Social History

THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE NEGRO. By Benjamin Brawley. The Macmillan Company.

THE introduction of African slaves into this country is an event which has affected our whole later history. Slavery was our biggest national issue. It nearly divided our country. Freedom for the negro did not solve the question. Black labor is an economic necessity in portions of the South. The black man has been loyal in all our wars and has earned a right to regard America as his native land. Nevertheless it seems almost impossible to give him a complete part in American life.

During most of this period circumstances made the negro inarticulate. He did not have the academic training which would enable him to present his story. Mr. Brawley is a Harvard graduate who has dedicated his life to historical research. He has a gift for accumulating facts. His "Social History of the Negro" is the best book on the topic since Booker T. Washington's "Story of the Negro." It is remarkably complete.

Mr. Brawley shows that the negro was very important as a pioneer. On his third voyage Columbus had a negro pilot. Pedro Alonso Nino Estevanico, a negro, helped explore the new country. Negroes were employed by the French in Louisiana. The negro was more important in colonial life than has been realized. He rendered assistance in the War of the Revolution, and Crispus Attucks was a negro, whose monument stands on Boston Common. Mr. Brawley traces the story of the negro from his first appearance through to the close of the great war. He gives the general public much information as to the attainments of his race which has never before been called to our attention. Gilpin's triumph in the "Emperor Jones" was anticipated by Mr. Aldridge, who in 1857 was regarded as one of the world's greatest actors. The negro made other intellectual contributions which were remarkable in view of his handicaps. His conquest of difficulties might be a source of inspiration to all mankind.

Mr. Brawley writes of the negro primarily as a problem rather than as a race. His title, "Social History," is rather a misnomer. He writes more about the negro as a football in national politics than about the customs and institutions of his race. It is normal for the historian to emphasize war, as that has been regarded as the chief function of history since the days when the cave man scrawled pictures of battles on the walls of his cave. Our school textbooks have always had a martial viewpoint. It is very natural that Mr. Brawley should follow this convention. It has been held that the negro was less worthy of sympathy than the Indian because he permitted himself to be enslaved. Accordingly Mr. Brawley shows that there were slave rebellions of great magnitude which were well conducted. He also shows that the negro served us well in all our wars.

No history of the negro should gloss over the wrongs perpetrated against the race. Mr. Brawley, however, places an undue emphasis upon lynchings. The last chapters of his book give details of lynchings, race riots and race wars. They contain nothing but the truth, but they are not the whole truth. These painful incidents are a blemish upon our civilization, but since the negro nevertheless loves this country it must be that he finds some kindness and some opportunity he could not find elsewhere. The hatred and distrust caused by lynchings are doomed to perish, but constructive efforts to solve the problem are being made by men of both races, and these cannot fail of permanent results. It is unfortunate that Mr. Brawley does not give more attention to these matters of lasting importance and leave the task of recording crime to the newspapers. Lincoln was a greater man than any Abolitionist, and Booker Washington did a bigger work than any race leader whose sole asset is criticism. It is one demerit of Mr. Brawley's viewpoint that he does not recognize the greatness of the founder of Tuskegee.

Mr. Brawley is a little too sensitive to the subject of caricature. It is perhaps unfortunate that all members of his race do not speak and write in his clear, faultless English, but it is legitimate for the dramatist and the short story writer to portray existing types. Mr. Brawley detests the negro minstrel show, but essentially it created sympathy for his race. The world would be poorer without the stories of Hugh Wiley, E. K. Means and Octavus Roy Cohen.

The American negro is a racial composite. Enemies of the race claim that the mulatto is superior to the pure black. On this point Mr. Brawley says: "No work on the negro that calls Toussaint L'Ouverture and Sojourner Truth mulattoes and that will not give the race credit for several well known pure negroes of the present day can command the attention of scholars. In America, however, it is the fashion to place upon the negro any blame or deficiency and to claim for the white race any merit that an individual may show. Furthermore—and this is a point not often remarked in discussions of the problem—the element of genius that distinguishes the negro of mixed blood is most frequently one characteristically negro rather than Anglo-Saxon."

To attribute all negro progress to the infusion of white blood is as absurd as the statement made by a negro clergyman "that Dumas, Poushlin and Browning were black Africans captured in war. However, there can be no real history of the American negro without a more complete analysis of the racial elements than Mr. Brawley or any other writer has yet given. Mr. Brawley has laid little stress upon the Indian blood in the American negro, although our present colored population has absorbed more of the red man's blood than the whites have. Crispus Attucks, Frederick Douglass and many other leaders were of Indian descent, but Mr. Brawley's chapter on the Indian and negro is merely an account of Osceola.

Although it is possible to differ with Mr. Brawley's perspective, he has written a book that will not soon be superseded. His scholarship and his style are alike praiseworthy. He has a very interesting account of Liberia, which shows the difficulties and successes of that little republic. His bibliography is excellent. After his book is laid aside the reader retains strong impressions of his systematic toil and the earnest spirit which is behind it.

Signs and Wonders

SIGNS AND WONDERS. By J. D. Beresford. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

A HEAVY little bundle of Mr. Beresford's highly sophisticated, learned, entertaining and sardonic snippets of the vagrant sociologizer with a knack for words. Many of the whole sixteen are extremely clever; none is more representative or better than the "Prologue," in which two men and a woman are seen talking before an illimitable background. They continue to exchange the most frightful banalities and trivialties—about Johnnie's being bit by a dog and the probable length of the doctor's bill, with detailed criticism of the varied costs of living—while, to quote the successive "stage directions"—"Enter R., a nebula, spinning slowly. It passes majestically across the background as the scene proceeds." "Enter R., a group of prehistoric animals; a few brontosauri, titanotheres, mammoths, sabre toothed tigers, and so on." "Enter R., a few thousand savages with flint weapons." "Exeunt savages; enter the population of India." "Enter two armies engaged in a civil war." "Civil war moves off L. Signs of the approaching end of the world become manifest." "The Hosts of Heaven appear in the sky." "The sea gives up its dead." "The universe bursts into flame." For a moment all is confusion, and then the spirit of the first man is heard speaking: "Well, I suppose I ought to be getting along." Second man: "Glad to have met you, anyway." Spirit of woman: "As you said, the world's a very small place. Remember me to the family." "As they go out the nebula, still spinning slowly, passes off the stage, L."

It is impossible to add any point to such suggestions as these of Mr. Beresford."